Tests begin on Olson remains

Experts seek clues to death

6/3/94

By DAN BURNS
News-Post Staff

Forensic experts Thursday exhumed the remains of Dr. Frank Olson from their resting place atop a grassy knoll overlooking the Fort Detrick labs where he conducted research on germ warfare before his mysterious death in November 1953.

The scientists and Dr. Olson's family are hoping to find some clues to his fatal fall from a New York City hotel room, just days after he had unknowingly been the subject of a Central Intelligence Agency experiment with the hallucinogen LSD.

Dr. Olson's body was lifted from the 4-foot-deep grave it had occupied since December 1953. Workers using a backhoe took about 30 minutes to unearth and remove the 3,000-pound concrete vault that held his mahogany coffin.

A forensic team led by Dr. James E. Starrs, a professor of law and forensic sciences at The George Washington University National Law Center, briefly studied the coffin and grave site before sending the coffin on to the Hagerstown Police crime lab for an extensive X-ray investigation.

The mummified remains "were in better condition than we ever expected," said Jeff Kercheval, a forensic chemist at the Hagerstown.

Frank Olson in 1952.

"We'll be able to take all the tissue samples we need."

While the remains in the coffin have not been formally identified as those of Dr. Olson – the family never made an identification for police in 1953 – Mr. Kercheval said there is little reason to doubt it is his body. But, "it's not like you can hold up a picture and say, 'That's him,' " he said.

The body will be moved today to York College in York, Pa., where it will be studied for the next month by Dr. Starrs and his team of medical examiners, anthropologists and behavioral scientists. The investigators will be looking for any evi-

(Continued on Page A-4)

Tests

(Continued from Page A-1)

dence of foul play, including traces of drugs other than LSD and evidence that Dr. Olson may have been given LSD on more occasions than already admitted by the CIA in 1975, Dr. Starrs said.

Eric Olson, who, with his brother Nils, had requested che investigation, watched Thursday as the vault and coffin holding his father's remains were lifted out of the ground. He said seeing the coffin again stirred memories of a man he last saw three days before Thanksgiving 1953.

"It's a somber feeling. I had a flashback memory of being in the Presbyterian Church and seeing the coffin," he said. He did not attend his father's burial, he said.

For him, his father's demise "was less a death than a vanishing," he said.

The family has never been satisfied with the official explanations for his death, and in their continuing search for the truth, Eric Olson, now a 49-year-old psychologist in Frederick, felt that disturbing his father's remains was necessary, he said. The brothers already had planned to move their father's body from Frederick Memorial Park at Linden Hill to be next to that of their mother, who is buried about two miles away at Mount Olivet Cemetery.

The death of one of the nation's top germ weapons researchers has been shrouded in mystery for the four decades since his unexplained plunge from the 13th floor of the Hotel Statler. Initially termed a suicide, the nature of the fall was later labeled accidental after it was learned that Dr. Olson had been the unwitting subject of CIA experiments with LSD.

About a week before his death, he and a group of other Detrick scientists gathered for a secret weekend conference at Deep Creek Lake with CIA agents monitoring their work. They were covertly given a dose each of LSD, according to a 1975 investigation.

Days later, after expressing a desire to leave his post, he was ordered to New York, accompanied by Dr. Robert V. Lashbrook, a CIA chemist, to undergo an evaluation by Dr. Harold Abramson, one of the few authorities on LSD at the time. Dr. Lashbrook, his minder and hotel roommate, was the last person to see him alive.

Eric Olson is convinced that his father's sensitive research position at the height of the Cold War was ample motive for the CIA to have wanted him silenced.

ERIC OLSON

"They had created a Frankenstein. They had destabilized him, demoralized him and now angered him. What were they going to do with him at that point?" he said.